Patterns of Power — a framework paper

THE SAME MENU AT EVERY SCALE

When the standing men run out of easy frontier, the hierarchies they serve begin to eat each other — and inter-state war is revealed as warlordism in robes, two apexes competing for the same annuity. At the moment of victory each faces the identical accountant's question, and the same short Menu of answers, whether the thing conquered is a village or an empire.

A framework paper in the Patterns of Power series · Thomas J. Bryan with Claude (Anthropic) · held as tested, not revealed

THE SAME MENU AT EVERY SCALE

When the standing men run out of easy frontier, the hierarchies they serve begin to eat each other — and inter-state war is revealed as warlordism in robes, two apexes competing for the same annuity. At the moment of victory each faces the identical accountant's question, and the same short Menu of answers, whether the thing conquered is a village or an empire.

A framework paper in the Patterns of Power series · Thomas J. Bryan with Claude (Anthropic) · held as tested, not revealed

Where the last two papers left us

Two arguments in this collection lead directly to this one, and it is worth restating their conclusions in a breath, because this paper is the hinge that joins them to the rest of the framework.

The first held that diffuse, headless orders — peoples whose coordination never pooled into a seizable apex — resist conquest precisely because they present nothing to seize, and that the property which makes them hard to capture is the same property that makes them hard to build into a state. The second held that a society which produces a surplus can free some of its people from labour to specialise in violence — standing men, whose force is continuous rather than episodic — and that such a society, driven by an elite that breeds more claimants than it can seat, is pushed to keep pointing that force outward, generation after generation, at the diffuse peoples on its margins.

Run that machine forward and it reaches a limit. The diffuse peoples get absorbed, cleared, or forced to centralise; the easy frontier closes. And the expanding

hierarchy, still hungry for the new stakes its overbred elite requires, still fielding standing men who must be kept employed, now finds that the thing on its border is no longer a headless people with no seat to take. It is *another durable hierarchy* — another apex sitting on its own surplus, fielding its own standing men, telling its own legitimating story to its own peasants. Two concentrated orders, each with a professional sword, each with an elite that needs somewhere to put its sons, and a finite quantity of land and labour lying between them. What happens when they meet is inter-state war, and this paper is about what inter-state war actually *is*, seen from the top of the world, and about the question each hierarchy faces at the moment one of them wins.

Inter-state war is warlordism that briefly drops the robe

Here is the claim, stated flatly and then defended: war between states is warlordism with a legitimating narrative on each side, two apex predators competing for the same prey, and the fact that both wear robes at home should not disguise that the transaction between them is as naked as any raid.

Every durable hierarchy tells its own people a story about why its rule is rightful and why its wars are just — defence, destiny, civilisation, the true faith, the national interest, the balance of power. That story is real work; it keeps the hierarchy's own little people funding the war and filling the ranks, and it keeps the record reading as something nobler than plunder. But the story is pointed *inward and downward* — at the hierarchy's own subjects and its own posterity — and it has almost nothing to do with the actual transaction between the two hierarchies, which is simply this: *whose standing men can take or hold the disputed ground, and what the winner will do with the losers.* Between two apexes there is no shared robe, no common congregation to be managed, and so, in the raw moment of dealing with each other, the robe can fall away entirely and the thing underneath shows.

There is no cleaner record of the robe falling away than the one the Athenians left at Melos in 416 BC, as Thucydides set it down. The Athenians came to the small neutral island to demand submission and tribute, and they opened the negotiation by explicitly *refusing* the usual justifying story — telling the Melians that they would not "trouble you with specious pretences" about having a right to empire or a grievance to redress, because such a speech "would not be believed," and proposing instead that both sides speak from "the real sentiments of us both." And then the sentence that has stood ever since as the plainest thing a hierarchy ever said to another about their dealings: "since you know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only in

question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." When the Melians refused, the Athenians took the city, killed the grown men, sold the women and children into slavery, and sent five hundred of their own colonists to inhabit the place.

Read what the Athenians did there. They dropped the robe — said outright that the justifying story was for the credulous, not for this table — and stated the transaction in its naked form: we are stronger, we will take what we can, and you will suffer what you must. That is not the language of a civilisation bringing order to barbarians. It is the language of one warlord to another, or of a warlord to a victim too weak to be worth lying to. The Athenians were a sophisticated imperial democracy with a magnificent robe for domestic use — the school of Hellas, the friend of liberty — and at Melos they showed that the robe was domestic use only, and that between hierarchies the operative fact was force and the annuity force could seize. **Inter-state war is the one arena where the robe is briefly unnecessary, because there is no shared congregation to manage — and in that moment you can see the warlordism that the robe exists, at home, to dress.** The strong do what they can. Everything else is for the record.

The victor's question is the framework's question, now at the scale of states

So two hierarchies fight, and one wins. And here the whole framework switches on, because the winner now faces the exact accountant's question this collection has been tracking from its first page — only now the defeated party is not a band or a tribe or a village but a *state*, a going concern with its own apparatus, its own elite, its own taxed and believing population. The question is identical at every scale: *I have won the battle. How do I now draw a durable revenue from these people without fighting every day forever?*

This is the question that separates a raid from a conquest, and it is the question the framework's Menu answers. A hierarchy that has just defeated another does not have infinite options; it has a short, recurring list, the same list a chief faces over a taken village and an empire faces over a taken kingdom. Set them out plainly:

Plunder and withdraw. Take the movable surplus — the treasury, the granary, the portable wealth — burn or wreck what cannot be carried, and leave without attempting to rule. This is the cheapest option and the least durable: a one-time extraction, no ongoing administration, no annuity, the raid rather than the conquest. It is what you do when the ground cannot be held or is not worth holding, and it is

the default of a hierarchy that wants the wealth but not the responsibility. The Gauls who sacked Rome and left, the viking host that took the danegeld and sailed — plunder is force converting itself directly into portable wealth and declining the harder problem of rule.

Decapitate and install your own. Kill or depose the defeated hierarchy's elite and put your own men in the vacated seats. This gives you the apparatus but staffs it with strangers, and it is expensive and brittle for exactly the reason developed elsewhere in this collection: your installed men have no warrant in the conquered order, command no belief the population already holds, and must be held up by your force indefinitely. This is the forged chair — the puppet on a throne he cannot hold when your army goes home — and it is the choice that looks decisive and turns ruinous.

Assume the chair. Leave the defeated hierarchy's apparatus running and insert yourself at the top of it — keep its tax-machine, its offices, its sub-elite, its habits of obedience, and simply redirect the annuity to yourself. This is the cheapest *durable* option, and it is available only under a specific condition: that the defeated order left a seizable apex whose belief and machinery transfer to a new occupant. Where that condition holds, the conqueror rules through a running machine and pays almost nothing; where it does not, the option is off the table. This is the move that made some empires cheap and whose absence made others ruinous.

Force your belief onto them. Replace the conquered hierarchy's legitimating story with your own — convert them, re-educate them, reform them into your order, so that in time they obey you from conviction rather than force. This is expensive up front and slow, and it is a gamble: if the formation *takes*, you eventually get the cheapest rule of all, a population that believes your rule is rightful and polices itself; if it does not take, you are left running an expensive occupation over a people whose belief never converted, paying in force and surveillance forever. The wager is whether you can hold the ground long enough, and control the formation completely enough, for the imposed belief to cool into the furniture of reality.

Blend the elites. Marry into the defeated hierarchy's elite, co-opt its leading families, share the annuity with them so that they have a stake in the new arrangement and defend it rather than resist it. This is the stabilising move, the one that turns a raw conquest into a going concern, because it converts the conquered elite from a standing grievance into a partner with something to lose. It is how a conquest stops being an occupation and becomes a dynasty — the Norman baron married to the Saxon heiress, the Manchu ruling through the mandarinate, the conqueror who makes the conquered nobility *his* nobility.

These are the options. Not infinitely many — five families of moves, endlessly combined and varied, but recognisably the same five whether the thing conquered is a hamlet or a hegemon. And which of them is *available* — not which is chosen, but which is even on the table — is set by the one variable this whole collection has been measuring.

The fork is the same at every scale

Here is the load-bearing point, the thing this paper exists to say: the fork that determines which options are available is identical whether the conquered thing is a diffuse village or a rival empire, and it turns on the same question every time — *did the defeated order leave a seizable apex, or not?*

A defeated hierarchy with a *concentrated, inheritable apex* hands the victor the cheap options. Its tax-machine can be redirected; its sub-elite can be co-opted; its habits of obedience can be transferred to a new occupant of the old seat. The victor can assume the chair, blend the elites, take the annuity through the apparatus that already exists — and rule cheaply, because he inherits a going concern. This is why a conqueror who defeats a centralised state in a single decisive battle can sometimes rule its millions almost overnight: he did not have to build anything, only to seize the seat the population already obeyed.

A defeated *diffuse people with no apex* forecloses those options and forces the expensive ones. There is no tax-machine to redirect, no sub-elite whose co-option delivers the population, no seat to assume — so the victor must either plunder and leave, or grind the people down and *manufacture* an apex that was never there and hold it up by force, or attempt the long expensive gamble of forcing his own belief onto them. He inherits nothing and must build everything, and he pays for the building every year.

This is the same fork that this collection has drawn between one conquest and another at the scale of colonies — a caliphate with an emir's chair to inherit against a headless people with no chair to seize. What this paper adds is that the fork is *scale-invariant*. It operates identically when a warlord swallows a village, when a kingdom swallows a tribe, and when an empire swallows a rival empire, because it is always the same underlying problem: force has won the battle, and now force must be converted into a durable revenue stream at the lowest ongoing cost, and the cost is set by what the defeated order left behind for the victor to work with. **The Menu is the same at every scale because the accountant's question is the same at every scale — and the answer available is set, every time, by whether the conquered order had a**

seizable seat. A conqueror facing a headless village and an emperor facing a headless nation are solving the identical problem and reading off the identical Menu; only the size of the annuity differs.

The recursion, and why the circuit never closes

One turn remains, and it is the one that makes this a loop rather than a line — that returns the whole argument to the recursion running through every case in this collection.

When a victorious hierarchy assumes the chair of a defeated one and rules through it, that arrangement does not stay a raw imposition if it holds. Given time, given control of the formation, given generations, the conquest *cools*. The grandchildren of the conquered are born into a world where the new arrangement simply *is* — where the victor's dynasty, the victor's law, the victor's story is as natural and unquestioned as the old order had been before the conquest. Gaul becomes "just Roman." The imposed becomes the furniture of reality, and its built origin is forgotten. And at that point the conquered state, digested and naturalised, has become *itself* a durable hierarchy with a seizable chair — a going concern, believed by its people, waiting for the next hierarchy to arrive with the same accountant's question and the same short Menu.

This is why the circuit never closes. Every apex a conqueror seizes was built by an earlier conqueror whose imposition cooled into a homeland. Every apex a conqueror builds is a chair for someone later. The states that eat states are themselves former conquests that took; the caliphate Lugard inherited was a jihad's conquest naturalised over a century; the Kikuyu order that had no seat to seize was itself a farming expansion that had overrun an earlier people; Rome that made Gaul "just Roman" was itself the naturalised conquest of the peoples the Romans remembered only as the wild men their heroes drove out. There is no bottom to it and no first innocent order — only earlier builds that took, and later builds laid over them, warlordism all the way down and robes all the way up.

And the framework this collection runs is the map of the one recurring moment in that endless circuit: the hinge where a hierarchy, having won a battle by force, must decide how to convert its victory into an annuity — and reaches, whether it is a chief over a village or an emperor over a fallen rival, for the same short Menu of answers, its choices bounded by the same single fork, the presence or absence of a seizable seat. Everything else — the robe, the story, the legitimating narrative that makes the whole thing read at home as something other than what the Athenians admitted at Melos —

is the management of belief that turns a raw conquest into a durable order, and, in time, into a homeland whose origin no one remembers as a conquest at all.

Reading the join against the framework

Three points close the argument and hand it back to the framework proper.

First, inter-state war is warlordism at scale, and the robe on each side is domestic. The story a hierarchy tells about its wars is aimed at its own congregation, not at its rival, and between two apexes the transaction is the naked one the Athenians named at Melos. **The presence of a legitimating narrative on both sides of a war does not make the war a clash of ideas; it makes it a clash of warlords who each have their own congregation to manage — and the war itself is decided by force, the annuity by the Menu.** To read inter-state war as a contest of civilisations or ideologies is to read the robe and miss the transaction.

Second, the accountant's question and its Menu are scale-invariant. The moment of victory poses the identical problem — convert force into durable revenue at the lowest ongoing cost — whether the defeated party is a band, a city, or an empire, and the answer is drawn from the same five families of moves: plunder, decapitate-and-install, assume the chair, force the belief, blend the elites. **What determines which moves are available is not the scale of the conquest but the structure of the conquered order — whether it left a seizable apex — and that single fork governs the outcome identically from the village to the empire.**

Third, the circuit is a loop, because every conquest that takes becomes the naturalised order that the next conqueror finds. There is no baseline, no first order, no innocent ground — only the endless succession of builds that cooled into homelands and were then built over in turn. **The framework maps one hinge in an unbounded recursion: the moment force must become annuity, faced by a warlord who is himself the heir of an older warlord's naturalised conquest, choosing from a Menu his successors will one day read over the ruins of his own.** That is the whole shape of it, from the surplus that first made standing men to the empire that eats another empire: warlordism seeking the cheapest durable hold, dressing the search in a story, and forgetting, after enough generations, that the story was ever a dress at all.

A note on sources. The Melian Dialogue — the Athenians' explicit refusal to "trouble" the Melians with "specious pretences," their proposal to speak from "the real sentiments of us both,"

the maxim that "right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must," and the fate of Melos (the grown men killed, the women and children enslaved, five hundred Athenian colonists settled) — is quoted from Book 5 of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* in the public-domain Richard Crawley translation (1874); the wording is that standard translation and is given exactly. The reading offered of the passage — that it shows the robe briefly dropped between two hierarchies — is interpretive. The sack of Rome by the Gauls and the Norse *danegeld* are cited from the general historical record as illustrations of the plunder option and are not quoted. The framework's Menu of options facing a victorious hierarchy (plunder, decapitation-and-installation, assuming the chair, forcing belief, blending elites) is developed across this collection, principally in the Field Manual and the foundational papers, and the illustrations of assuming the chair, the forged chair, and elite-blending draw on the Northern Nigeria, Kenya, and Afghanistan studies in this collection. The two papers whose conclusions open this one — on the headless order's resistance to capture, and on surplus-funded standing men and elite-driven expansion — are *The Headless Order* and *The Standing Men* in this collection, where their own sources are set out. The recursion — that a conquest which takes cools over generations into a naturalised homeland that the next conqueror finds as a going concern — is developed in the foundational papers on the built order becoming "the furniture of reality."

Legibility is not pardon. Naming inter-state war as warlordism in robes is not a claim that all wars are morally identical or that no cause is better than another; it is a claim about the transaction between hierarchies as distinct from the stories they tell their own people, and about the accountant's question that follows every victory regardless of the justice of the war that produced it. The Athenians at Melos are quoted because they said the quiet part aloud, not because saying it aloud made the killing worse than the killings other hierarchies dressed more carefully. The reader is owed the transaction and the robe as two separate things, and left to weigh them.

The arithmetic is laid out. The sum is left to the reader.

Part of the collection Patterns of Power. Tested, never revealed.